

**EU-NATO Relations: A Future of Cooperation or Conflict?**

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### **Abstract**

What is the purpose of developing military and defense infrastructure through the EU when NATO has been the cornerstone of European security since its creation? European Union leaders realized the need to develop a common defense policy in the late 1990's, and since then the urgency to develop a concrete, collaborative framework has only increased. There is controversy over whether or not a more systematized European defense institution will motivate member states to prioritize defense spending and cooperate on security issues, and how NATO will respond to further actions toward EU security integration. Through describing the evolution of EU defense policy as it has unfolded over the last 20 years and identifying possible drivers of this evolution, I will analyze how the EU and NATO have historically worked together on matters of strategic importance and how they might cooperate to ensure lasting security in Europe.

*Keywords: European Union, NATO, Defense, Security, Military*

## **Introduction**

The security environment in Europe is rapidly growing more unpredictable as Russian aggression increases, terrorism becomes more prevalent, high migration rates continue, and populism spreads. Since its inception, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been the cornerstone of European security, while the European Union (EU) has been unable to create substantial military integration among its member states. However, with a new administration in the US continuing to push European members to contribute more, and Brexit well underway, the future of defensive capabilities in Europe is uncertain. The relationship between the EU and NATO has been slowly shifting to one of benevolence, as US opinion has evolved, and new threats have forced cooperation, but the future is still unclear. EU leaders have outwardly stated that military and defense integration and bolstering is meant to supplement NATO resources and advance the capabilities for cooperation on European defense issues, which leads me to argue that the future of EU-NATO relations will continue to move towards greater cooperation as capabilities are improved and conversations expanded.

## **Membership**

Over the years, both the EU and NATO have expanded geographically and functionally and have, for the most part, expanded together. Currently, both the EU and NATO are comprised of 28 member nations. After the completion of Brexit, 21 states will have membership in both the EU and NATO. The few members of the EU that aren't in NATO are: Ireland, Malta, Austria, and Cyprus, Finland and Sweden.

### **Finland and Sweden: A Special Partnership**

Finland and Sweden both actively cooperate with NATO but are not participants in the NATO Command Structure. Both are considered "Enhanced Opportunity Partners" and have

contributed to multiple NATO operations. More recently cooperation has expanded with “exchanges of information on hybrid warfare, coordinating training exercises, and developing better joint situational awareness to address common threats and develop joint actions” (NATO, 2017). Furthermore, NATO is currently working on incorporating both states into the “enhanced NATO Response Force and regular consultations on security in the Baltic Sea region” (NATO, 2017). Both Finland and Sweden, given their geographic proximity and complicated history with Russia, have decided to continue their tradition of remaining officially neutral even though they do choose to cooperate very closely with NATO. This is important to note because Finland and Sweden are two EU member states that contribute effectively to furthering EU-NATO cooperation, even without being official members of NATO.

### **Evolution of EU Defense Policy**

The three most recent steps in bolstering EU defense policy have been the creation of: the European Security Defense Policy (ESDP), the European External Action Service (EEAS), and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). The ESDP, which was later refashioned into the Common Security and Defense Policy and the Common Foreign Security Policy, encompasses all defense and military aspects of EU foreign policy in order to promote more cohesive security among member states. The EEAS was created in 2009 with the purpose of serving as the diplomatic corps of the EU furthering the foreign policy goals of the EU. PESCO was officially signed into law in 2002 with the creation of the Lisbon Treaty but has only recently been launched in December of 2017, with nearly all members of the EU signing on (Biscop and Coelmont, 2011). “PESCO permits member states ‘whose military capabilities fulfill higher criteria, and which have made more binding commitments to one another in this area with a view to the most demanding missions’ to cooperate more closely than the EU-27 context permits” (Beckmann, 2017. p. 2-3).

For a complete timeline of milestones in EU defense policy, see Table 1 in the Appendix. The creation of these structures all play into the EU's new focus on defense and security policy in order to create a space where member states are able to collaborate more efficiently on defense issues and rely on NATO less. While NATO will remain the cornerstone of European defense, with the creation of battlegroups, bolstering of CSDP and the development of PESCO, the EU has seen more improved defense and military integration among its member states.

### **Possible Drivers of this Evolution**

When reviewing prior research done on the EU and the evolution of its defense policy by experts in the field, identifying factors that catalyzed the progression of the EU's defense policy stand out. These factors can be categorized as either internal factors or external factors. One internal factor that is quite clear is, the "Brexit vote and electoral successes for populist parties and movements channeling rising public demands for security" (Beckmann, 2017, p. 1). There has been a clear rise in populist parties across a variety of European states, including Italy, Austria, Hungary, and France. The internal pressures seen in the EU from various member state governments and interest groups has become more evident since the migration crisis in 2015 and the rise in terrorist attacks throughout Europe. These internal pressures are reflected in the divide of member-state opinion on what the future of European defense should look like: some member states are intent on continuing to rely on NATO for all defensive capabilities while others are looking to wield their sovereignty and expand defensive capabilities bilaterally, and through the EU. One external factor driving the urgency of the EU to bolster defense policy is the US President Trump who openly questions NATO and the increased international threats like Russia and transnational terrorism (Beckmann, 2017). While US leadership has called for its European partners in NATO to increase their defense spending to have more buy-in into European security, President

Trump has been the most outspoken on this issue, which has led to the spread of uncertainty regarding NATO's willingness to uphold its Article V commitments; these commitments include considering an attack on one an attack on all and coming to the aid of any member state that is attacked. These are just the most central factors influencing the EU's renewed emphasis on defense policy.

### **Evolution of EU-NATO Relations**

The European Union has only recently begun to make defense policy a clear priority, and much speculation has been made about how this will affect EU-NATO relations. In 1999, when the EU signed the Common Security and Defense Policy into law, the US was especially concerned about the EU interfering with the actions and structures of NATO (Merlingen, 2012). In short, the EU's desire for a greater role in international security has been controversial in transatlantic relations. At the beginning of the EU's development of defense policy, the US was adamant about EU policy not interfering with the structures and operations of NATO, and worried about losing influence which caused some tension between the EU and NATO. In recent years, the US has signaled its belief that European states should do more to reduce the strain on US manpower and financial resources on security in Europe but still wanted NATO to remain central to European security and didn't want the EU to interfere or overshadow NATO (Merlingen, 2012). NATO is still the most substantial defense force in Europe and has been very open with sharing resources with its members, most of whom are also members of the EU.

With increasing threats from Russia in the East and a steady rise in terrorism internationally, some EU member states are pushing for more permanent coalition forces between EU member states, specifically EU members who are not members of NATO and are feeling more vulnerable to threats. There are some disagreements among member states on what the defense and security

goals of the EU should be. Western European states have increasingly been emphasized the need for more autonomy from NATO on crisis management, while Eastern and Central European states who are most threatened by Russian aggression still see NATO as the essential security alliance in Europe (Helwig, 2018). At the end of 2016, prompted by the Ukraine crisis, NATO and the EU created a list of proposals on ways the two organizations can cooperate more. This list was expanded at the end of 2017 to 74 recommendations that fall into several topic areas (Helwig, 2018). While progress has been made to increase communication between the staffs of the two organizations, no concrete progress has been made in creating structures that substantially improve real cooperation. Three of the topic areas involve improving cooperation on: combatting *hybrid threats*, sharing information on potential *terrorist attacks*, and improving *military mobility* on the continent. According to Niklas Helwig's (2018) analysis of these recommendations in his report, "New Tasks for EU-NATO Cooperation", the most progress has been made in improving research and analysis on hybrid threats, while little progress has been made on the other two topics.

### **Is Cooperation Necessary?**

As the European continent's problems continue to grow in complexity and variety, new approaches to combatting these problems need to be sought out and utilized. While many of these problems are not directly related to military defense, greater cooperation with NATO could lead to more stability and a better environment to address them. At the heart of both the EU and NATO is the member state, and both organizations should be willing to pursue cooperation to create more stability in each member state. Kathleen McInnis (2014), a former Chatham House expert, described the diverse needs of NATO member states based on their geopolitical realities, and called for more intentionality by NATO in approaching these diverse problems. William Drozdiak (2015), at the Brookings Institute, argues that cooperation between the EU and NATO is

imperative saying: “A holistic policy approach by the EU and NATO in dealing with all of these new security threats would encourage greater contributions from Western allies by drawing on a much broader range of resources from member governments to find effective solutions” (p. 1). In 2014, the NATO Group of Policy Experts, chaired by the director of Chatham House Robin Niblett (2014), highlighted some key ideas on how NATO can be strengthened. This included the idea that, “NATO and the EU must also cooperate closely to deliver their comprehensive range of capabilities to manage international crises, from market access and development assistance to military intervention and post-conflict civilian support” (p. 1). In this day and age, with the myriad of new and complex issues that European member states are facing, the only way to efficiently and effectively combat these problems is for the EU and NATO to continue to improve cooperative measures in a tangible way.

### **Examples of Cooperation**

It is clear that the EU and NATO have some similar goals, mainly focused on the stability and security of the 21 member states that belong to both organizations, as well as the stability of the European continent as a whole. Given this shared interest, the EU and NATO have collaborated on defense and security in the past, both in times of crisis and on future preparedness.

In 2016, at the height of the migration crisis, NATO launched a supplementary reconnaissance mission in the Aegean Sea to assist the EU member states’ search and rescue operation, and to collaborate on anti-smuggling efforts. The NATO Supreme Allied Commander General Philip Breedlove ordered three warships from the Standing Maritime Group 2 to patrol the Aegean Sea (Zhukov, 2016). According to a NATO press release from June 2016:

“In February 2016, on the request of Germany, Greece and Turkey, NATO decided to join international efforts in dealing with this crisis. NATO is contributing to international efforts to

stem illegal trafficking and illegal migration in the Aegean Sea, through intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance in the Aegean Sea and at the Turkish-Syrian border. To this end, NATO is cooperating with the European Union's border management agency Frontex, in full compliance with international law and the law of the sea." (NATO, 2016)

On NATO-EU cooperation, the press release stated that NATO had established "arrangements enabling direct links with Frontex at the operational and tactical levels, allowing for faster exchange of information between the two organizations" (NATO, 2016). In addition, the NATO Secretary General had conversations with several EU representatives to discuss the migration crisis. This is one example of NATO and the EU cooperating on a major problem that significantly affects the whole of Europe.

One of the most significant new problems facing the EU is the increased prevalence of cyber warfare and cyber-attacks against member states, specifically the Baltic states, by Russia. After the Russian attack on Estonia in 2007, NATO developed its Cyber Defense Policy, which was the first recognition of cyber security as a priority (Lete, 2017). In 2013, the EU similarly created its Cybersecurity Strategy (Lete, 2017). In February 2016,

"NATO and the EU signed a Technical Arrangement on Cyber Defense between NATO's Computer Incident Response Capability and the EU's Computer Emergency Response Team. The most significant step was made with the signing of the EU-NATO Joint Declaration of July 2016 that creates a concrete framework for cooperation in security and defense... [which] recognizes four areas of cooperation: integration of cyber defense into missions and operations; training and education; exercises; and standards." (Lete, 2017)

With the alignment of goals and a common approach to cyber defense, the EU and NATO have been able to increase cooperation on the improvement of response and prevention of cyberattacks against member states.

One shared goal of the EU and NATO is increasing the ability for European states to counter hybrid warfare efforts from Russia. One way that this goal has been pursued collaboratively by both organizations is through the creation of the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. “On the initiative of Finland, 12 EU and NATO members have joined the new European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. The center opened in Helsinki in autumn 2017 outside of the official EU and NATO structures” (Helwig, 2018, p. 2). The fact that the center is outside the official structure of the two organizations makes it possible for the most intensive collaboration efforts to happen among any interested European state regardless of membership.

### **Future Potential for Cooperation**

The two organizations have made steps to increase communication on areas of security interests to both, however more concrete, structural improvements need to be made. The key to more easily increasing the ability to cooperate is to align the goals of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy and NATO’s security goals, as well as fixing the mismatch and duplication problem being seen in the two organizations working primarily separately. Below are some examples of concrete measures both organizations can take to improve their capacity to cooperate on security issues in Europe.

#### **A Military Schengen Zone**

One of the biggest obstacles to the improvement of military mobility in Europe is the misalignment of permits and border controls on military materiel. There have been calls from the

Commander of NATO for the creation of a military Schengen zone throughout the EU, based on the EU Schengen zone, as well as some limited pursuit of joint projects to improve the continuity of mobility infrastructure across member states like ports, air fields, bridges and roads that could improve the ability to move troops and larger military equipment.

“NATO has made substantial progress in surmounting legal hurdles to cross-border operations, lingering bureaucratic requirements - such as passport checks at some border crossings and infrastructure problems, like roads and bridges that can't accommodate large military vehicles - could slow or even cripple any allied response to an emerging threat.”

(Herszenhorn, 2017)

This proposal could be initiated through a new intergovernmental agreement among participating Baltic states, and should provide suggested criteria for the incorporation of additional states on a voluntary basis in the future. Criteria agreed upon in this proposed agreement should solidify uniform border procedures and infrastructure in order to ease the ability of transporting troops and military matériel throughout members of this zone. Sharing of information on the infrastructure within each signatory of the military Schengen zone agreement, as well as the new ability to pool resources, would make the improvement and equalizing of infrastructure easier. As rapid deployment of forces would significantly improve NATO's ability to defend all member states in the alliance and the EU's ability to respond to crisis, a military Schengen zone would effectively align the goals of the EU and NATO to create tangible cooperation efforts.

### **The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)**

The EU's most recent step towards greater defense integration is its establishment of the long-idealized Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Given how new this framework is, the

structure and institutions are still undeveloped, giving the EU and NATO a unique opportunity for cooperation. If the EU can align the goals and structure of PESCO with current NATO goals and institutions, PESCO will be better able to fulfill its stated goal according to the EU:

“The EU emphasizes that PESCO does not compete with NATO. The aim of the projects is to develop national military capabilities that can be deployed under either EU, NATO or UN flags.” (Helwig, 2018, p. 3)

The PESCO framework allows for greater cooperation of member states on security-related projects they propose. Helwig suggests that “Germany could introduce PESCO projects that are more closely aligned with NATO’s strategic goals. NATO is interested in projects that improve interconnectivity, digitization and joint training of troops” (Helwig, 2018, p. 3). Because PESCO is so new and underdeveloped, there is a unique opportunity to forge a new connection between the EU and NATO on a deeper structural level than what has been achieved previously.

### **Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC) at Papa Air Base, Hungary**

The Papa Air Base in Hungary was established through NATO in 2009, with the eventual signing of ten member states and two partner countries, Finland and Sweden, to participate in the Strategic Airlift Capability Initiative in 2015. The goal of this initiative is to “provide NATO nations and participating partners with strategic airlift capabilities” (NATO, 2015). While this initiative was developed by NATO, the strategic lift aircraft kept at this military base are able to be allocated for NATO, UN or EU missions. SAC can be a useful tool utilized to deter Russia from continuing its aggressive, destabilizing actions in Eastern Europe and the Baltic Sea Region, especially given the base’s strategic location in Hungary. This structure is an example of a NATO-led initiative that can be expanded to allow EU member states not in NATO to participate and

contribute to, with the greater goal of increasing cooperation between the two organizations and increasing the security of Europe.

### **Conclusion**

Greater cooperation between the EU and NATO is of paramount importance for the stability and security of the European continent. While some progress has been made by the two organizations to increase mechanisms for increased cooperation, there is still significant work to be done. With the increased complexity and variety of problems facing Europe, such as Russian aggression, terrorism, populism, Brexit, etc., a multi-faceted, creative approach is needed in order to effectively combat them. The creation of a military Schengen zone, developing PESCO to better align with EU and NATO defensive goals, and incorporating EU member states into the SAC are just three examples of ways that EU-NATO relations can continue to grow closer in order to improve the security environment in Europe, as well as the ability for the two organizations to protect the stability and national interests of their member states.

### Appendix

<b>Timeline of EU Defense Policy Development</b>	
<b>Year</b>	<b>New Development</b>
1993	Establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, through the Maastricht Treaty
1999	Establishment of the ESDP
2007	Creation of the first standing EU Battlegroup
2009	CSDP replaces the ESDP, through the Lisbon Treaty
2010	Establishment of the European Union External Action Service (EEAS)
2017	Creation of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)

*Table 1: Since 1993, the EU has made several concrete steps towards further integrating the defense capabilities of its member states.*

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